



## Aftermath by the zesty lemon

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**Summary:** In the overwhelming chaos of the parking lot, El breaks. All Joyce can do is watch, selfishly holding her son closer.

\*CONTAINS SEASON 3 SPOILERS!\*

## Aftermath

Starcourt Mall is in shambles.

Everywhere, debris litters the ground, electrified in the darkness by the flickering lights and fires that have broken out.

Joyce knows things went wrong up here, just as things went wrong beneath, but seeing the degree of damage makes her stomach sink.

That's before her and Bauman see the Flayer.

The world feels sharply close and somehow so far away when they're hustled past the stinking, squelching remains of that monstrosity. This, *this* was what their children were up against. It's only Bauman beside her who manages to keep Joyce on her feet, hurrying her towards the mall entrance and away from that thing.

She barely registers the muggy, cooling air of a summer night against her clammy skin when they finally emerge from Starcourt Mall.

The pain searing in her heart at Hop's loss is for later, because right now she *needs* to see her sons have made it out – it's the only way Joyce will *ever* be okay again.

Holding on to Bauman for support, both of them sweaty and gritty and just a little more than numb, Joyce scans the chaotic crowd for her children.

Past the hordes of armed soldiers, government officials and firefighters, there's a half circle of ambulances. It's here that her and Bauman stagger towards.

When she finally spots them, the most inexplicable feeling of relief and regret surges through her. Relief that Will is alive. Relief when she sees Jonathan standing not too far off, followed sharply by regret. Aching, painful regret that either of her children would have to go through this.

Will meets her with a hug just as bruising as hers. He's trembling and pale, but he's alive.

They *both* are.

And then, too soon, Joyce spots El.

She's limping badly, pale, bloodied and sagging with exhaustion. Those too dark eyes meet Joyce's for a fleeting moment, but soon move beyond them, searching for Hop.

El is the furthest thing from stupid, Joyce knows she'd put two and two together—but she wishes so desperately it *hurts* that it didn't have to be this way. The world has already been so twisted and cruel to El in ways Joyce can never conceive and this is just one more scar to add. She wants more than anything to shield her from the truth, just a little longer.

Joyce's world is in tact... but she couldn't even return the favour.

Hugging Will close, Joyce sobbed into his shoulder, her eyes never leaving El.

El stops looking past Joyce, her searching gaze once more coming to meet hers. Joyce knows she is an open book, the pain is too close to the surface, too raw for her to hide. El reads it all in a moment, and Joyce only sobs harder into Will's shoulder.

In the overwhelming chaos of the parking lot, El *breaks*.

All Joyce can do is watch, selfishly holding her son closer.

The noise that escapes El burns through Joyce's heart. It's a horrible, heartbreaking sound like a wounded animal.

Joyce watches tears well up in El's eyes, watches her stagger back, her head moving almost imperceptibly left to right in a silent "*no*".

"El?" It's Mike who's alert to El's distress first and in the next moment he's at her side, "what's wrong? El?"

The urgency in his tone has a ripple effect and soon the whole party is up again, crowding around.

El is trembling violently, her body wracked in silent sobs and the

only thing she seems able to do is shake her head over and over again, tears pouring down her cheeks.

Will pulls away from Joyce, concerned for his friend and it's that moment that she snaps out of it.

"El?" Will calls, just as Joyce pushes past him, beelining for the young girl on the ground holding on to Mike as though he were the last thing holding her together. For all he is worth, Mike is holding her too, letting her know without words that he will always be there—no matter what.

"I'm s-so sorry." Joyce choked, her throat closing up on itself. She drops to her knees in front of El, crawling as close as she allows herself to. Anxiety, guilt, regret, everything slams into Joyce's gut at once. If only she'd been a little faster. If only she could have thought of a way to bring both of them back. Joyce knows that she, Will and Jonathan only stand here now because of El. Her world is still mostly complete, held aloft only by the sheer will power and loyalty of the super powered teen.

How was it *fair*? Why hadn't she been able to save *Hop*?

Everyone else is wondering what the hell is going on, but in that moment, Joyce shuts it all out, only focused on the girl in front of her.

"He—" it hurts to say it aloud, hurts to say something so final, but it has to be said. "He's gone, honey. I'm... I'm so sorry."

El screws her eyes shut, tears leaking from the corner of her eyes and Joyce falters, but then keeps going. "He saved us.... He saved us all." The words come out much more strongly than how she feels.

No one else's reaction matters to her. Joyce ignores the cacophony of noise surrounding them, waiting for El to say something—anything. Why wasn't she screaming at her? Demanding to know why Joyce couldn't even manage to bring Hop back? But it never came.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, El managed to choke out, "it's not... your fault."

The power of those words shatters Joyce.

Hopper sacrificed himself for their children. His child. Joyce knew without a doubt had the roles been reversed, she would have done the same thing if it meant even a chance that Will and Jonathan would survive. Too easily it could have been the other way around, but Hopper had done what any good dad would do.

Joyce bit back a sob and held her arms open to El the same way she had just enveloped Will. El flung herself into her open arms, and finally the dam broke. All the tears, all the pain, all the anguish came pouring out.

Joyce wasn't sure how long she sat holding El, kissing the top of her head, stroking her hair and telling her it would be okay—and she didn't care.

Eventually the world would come back into focus. Eventually they would need to get up, deal with the aftermath and accept the hole that Hopper's loss would leave in their hearts, but for now, Joyce would stay here and hold El for as long as she needed.

Even though Hop was gone, El was *never* going to be without a family again.

A/N: This is a little different from what I normally write, but my heart absolutely BROKE during this scene. I was full on crying like a little bitch, so I figured, what's a little more heart break? It came pouring out, but thinking about how Joyce might have reacted made me feel better... WHO ELSE NEEDS A HUG?!